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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000773

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SUBJECT: ACTING HUMAN RIGHTS MINISTER ON DISAPPEARANCES AND
DISPLACEMENT

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert S. Ford for
reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) Summary. Acting Minister of Human Rights Narmeen Othman told PolOffs March 5 that, although acts of violence and displacement appeared to have leveled off over the past two days, the situation remains tense. Minister Othman asserted that reports of sectarian displacement had decreased over the past few days, but that displacement on a smaller scale would continue to occur. Noting that the Ministry's Human Rights Report would be released within the next month, the Minister highlighted detainee abuse, disappearances, and sectarian displacements as the top three issues. She underlined that the Ministry was receiving up to 50 reports a day of disappearances throughout Iraq, especially within Baghdad. The Minister claimed that many of those abducted were eventually found dead. She did not, however, have the details to substantiate this statement. End Summary.

SECTARIAN SITUATION STILL TENSE, LEADERS ARE KEY

12. (C) On March 5, Minister Othman asserted to PolOffs that, although the level of violence appeared to have leveled off, the sentiment in the streets was still very tense. The mood, she said, could be aggravated by many factors, including inaction by political leadership. Emphasizing the importance of political leadership unity, Minister Othman likened the political and social landscape to a gasoline spill that could be ignited by inaction. However, Minister Othman said that even with unity at the top leadership level, the social and political situation was also very much influenced by mid-level leaders and organizers.

REPORTS OF DISPLACEMENT LEVELING OFF

13. (C) Minister Othman said that the post-Samarra sectarian displacement spike had flattened out. She was quick to point out however that sectarian displacement was not a new problem and would continue to occur, albeit on a smaller scale. Simply because the recent spike in sectarian displacement had leveled off, she said, did not equate to the issue being resolved. Pointing to an example close to home, she recounted how one of her Assyrian Christian employees had recently taken time off from work to find a new place to live. An "X" had been spray-painted on his residence, a sign the Minister said, that the inhabitant was marked for assassination. The Minister noted later that displacements would be highlighted in the Ministry's soon-to-be released Human Rights Report.

DISAPPEARANCES STILL A SERIOUS ISSUE - MILITIAS KEY

14. (C) Turning her thoughts to other problems, Othman told PolOffs that the Ministry receives more than 50 reports a day about disappearances across Iraq, and the majority of these come from Baghdad. The Minister asserted that many of these individuals have later been found dead shortly after their abductions. Minister Othman, who is Kurdish, highlighted a recent case in which 3 Kurds from Sadr City were abducted over the past week, and subsequently killed. Like the recent displacements, she associated these disappearances and killings with increased levels of sectarianism and militia activity.

15. (C) The Minister contended that the only way to defeat this problem would be to study the problem more carefully. To develop a sufficient strategy of action, she said, you must first study the enemy's strategy -- a simple course of action would not be sufficient. For example, the Minister continued, even if Badr Corp members were expelled from the MoI, they would still belong to the Badr Corps, and would still conduct their death raids. The key would be to learn more about what is motivating those involved with militias. Why, she asked PolOffs, do you think that Badr Corps has such a strong following, especially among those between 18 and 25?

MINISTRY'S HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT TO BE RELEASED SOON

16. (C) After learning that the State Department's 2005

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Human Rights Report would be released within the next week, the Minister appeared pleased. She in turn indicated to PolOffs that the Ministry's own Human Rights Report would be released to the Prime Minister's office within the next few weeks. Othman pledged to share a bootlegged copy of it with the Embassy. She indicated that detainee issues would be a primary focus of the report, as well as disappearances and displacements.

COMMENT

17. (C) The Minister's focus on militias, disappearances and other human rights issues was notable. As the Minister of Environment as well as Acting Minister for Human Rights, Minister Othman has had to delicately balance her time between the two Ministries, often to the detriment of the Ministry of Human Rights, if not to both. Although Minister Othman will leave the ministry once a new Minister is appointed, we will endeavor to keep her and her colleagues engaged on human rights issues.

KHALILZAD